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The Proposed Confession Of 1967

Comments on
"The Proposal To Revise The Confessional Position Of The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A."

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THE PROPOSED CONFESSION OF 1967

When the proposed Confession of 1967 was presented to the General Assembly in May 1965, it was accompanied by an important statement written by the Chairman of the Committee which prepared the Creed, Dr. Edward A. Dowey, Jr. In it Dr. Dowey sets forth the reasons why a new Confession is considered necessary. He points out that the Church "was fearful of evolutionists like Lyell and Darwin, of higher criticism of the Bible, of development in theology, and in short of modern culture." He goes on to say: "Church theology should not reflect every ripple of history and every wind of doctrine. But it must respond when it crosses over a major watershed such as the eighteenth century. It must be ready to respond again in the future to yet unknown but certainly profound changes that lie ahead." The obvious meaning of these words is that the Church must accept evolution, higher criticism, development in theology as essential elements of modern culture. It must recognize that in doing so, it is taking only the first step toward a changing creed for a changing world. It is in this light that the New Confession should be regarded by the officers and members of the Presbyterian Church.

Modern culture is largely dominated by the theory of naturalistic evolution. Countless ages of uniformitarian development replace the fiat-creationism of Genesis I. Millions of years of development from protoplasm to *homo sapiens* replace the creation of man in the image of God. The fall of Adam is lost sight of in the story of human progress. Sin becomes some kind of abnormality which man is expected to outgrow. In its most consistent form this culture is atheistic. The universe is looked upon as a self-contained system which neither knows nor needs God.

Consider the application of this outlook to the Holy Scriptures:

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

A recent book in the Old Testament field is Bright's

A History of Israel. Its general viewpoint is expressed when the author tells us that "It was only with the triumph of Biblical criticism in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the subjection of the Bible to the methods of modern historiography, that the problem first emerged" (p. 61), i.e., the problem as to the value and dependability of the Bible as a record of the history of Israel, which is of course Bright's primary concern, or what the Confession of 1967 calls the "literary and historical understanding of the Bible." Dr. Bright concludes a summary of the Biblical books which were written, according to the critics, after 538 B.C. with the words, "and finally, of course, The Book of Daniel (ca. 166/5)" (p. 417). If we understand Dr. Bright correctly, he does not mean the words "of course" as an affront to the thousands and even millions of Bible-believing Christians who hold that the book was written in the time of Daniel more than 300 years earlier. He is merely stating what he regards as one of the "assured results" of higher criticism of the Bible.

Yet it is a noteworthy fact that there are few if any books in the OT the contents of which are as exactly dated as Daniel. The narrative begins with the third year of Jehoiakim (c. 600 B.C.) when Nebuchadnezzar took Daniel captive; and its latest date is the third year of Cyrus (536 B.C.). Daniel is named 72 times in the book, the first half of which describes events occurring within this period; the second half records prophecies made by Daniel during this same period. The book has been a storm center for centuries, especially since the rise of higher criticism. But it has been ably defended by many conservative scholars, like R. D. Wilson, R. P. Dougherty, E. J. Young, and J. C. Whitcomb, Jr. Yet Bright tells us that "of course" it dates from the Maccabean period. And the critics are practically unanimous in holding this position. Why is this?

We recognize that certain linguistic and factual problems have been raised against the early date of Daniel, as for example the mention of Belshazzar and the Aramaic dialect in which part of it is written. But most of these problems are of secondary importance

and have been solved. There have been two main objections to the early date: the miracles and prophecies which the book contains. The main reason the precise date 166/5 B.C. is fixed as the date of the book is because it is held that the prophecies in Daniel 11 describe the events of the Maccabean war so accurately that they belong as history, not prophecy to that period. Not all the advocates of the late date reject predictive prophecy, but it is undoubtedly true that denial of the possibility of long-range prediction has figured prominently in the verdict for the late date.

The other important feature in Daniel which figures largely in the rejection of the early date, is the miraculous element. It is alleged that the wonderful stories of the three youths in the fiery furnace, of Nebuchadnezzar's madness, of Daniel in the lions' den do not fit into a sober historical narrative. They are explained as folklore, wonder tales, exaggerated accounts, products of oral tradition, built up over the years into something quite different from the original event. So they are regarded as dating centuries later than the time of the historical Daniel.

GENESIS I TO XI

Having looked at what Dr. Bright regards as one of the latest books in the OT, we turn back now to the very beginning, to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Referring again to Dr. Bright's volume we find that in his *History* these chapters are replaced by two chapters dealing with the pre-patriarchal age. They are based on the archaeology of the pre-patriarchal or prehistoric period; and have little or nothing to say about the Biblical account. No mention is made of the Creation of the world, of Adam and Eve, of the Fall, the Flood, and of the Tower of Babel. Any reference to them comes many chapters later in discussing "borrowings" by the Israelites from the Babylonians or other neighboring peoples. With this viewpoint the Confession of 1967 is entirely in accord. For it not only omits any reference to these events, but flatly denies the most important of them with the words: "In Jesus of Nazareth true humanity was realized once

for all." These words deny that true humanity was first realized when God created Adam in his own image, that by Adam's sin the image was marred and defiled, and that it is in Christ, the second Adam, that man is redeemed and restored to the image of his Creator. Furthermore, the words "was realized" *may* be interpreted as referring to a natural development climaxed in the human nature of Jesus, which may be understood as involving a denial of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. It would be hard to put more real and potential error into a single sentence of a dozen words.

GENESIS XXIV

According to the usual critical reconstruction of the Pentateuch, the oldest document J (10th century) begins at chapter 2:4b. Since it gives us the fullest account of the patriarchs, we expect to find information here as to the life of Abraham. Genesis 24 tells of the choosing of a wife for Isaac. This is one of the most beautiful stories in the Pentateuch. It gives us a glimpse of the personal life of Abraham and his loyal Eliezer. It tells of faith in God, of believing prayer, and of its answer. We read that Abram caused his servant to swear by Jehovah (Yahweh) the God of heaven and the God of the earth that he would carry out his master's commands. We read of the servant's prayer (vss. 12-14), in which he asks for a sign from God, that the damsel of whom he asks a sup of water from her pitcher shall offer to draw water for his ten camels. We read of the prompt answer to this prayer and of the servant's gratitude for it: "And the man bowed his head and worshipped Jehovah. And he said, Blessed be Jehovah, the God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and truth: I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren."

In Genesis 24, Jehovah is mentioned 18 times. How is this subject dealt with by Dr. Bright? He tells us: "Whatever the origins of the worship of Yahweh, no trace of it before Moses has been found. We cannot, therefore, read normative Yahwism or even primitive Yahwism, back upon the patriarchs" (p. 88); and again, even more pointedly, "Whether or not Yahweh

was worshipped before Moses is a question that cannot be answered" (p. 116). One might think that Genesis 24 gives a definite and conclusive answer to this question. But if the document J dates from about the time of David (10th century) and is the product of a long process of oral tradition, as the critics tell us, then we cannot be sure that Abraham was a Jehovah worshipper. We cannot even be sure that there ever was an Abraham. Yet Abraham is referred to frequently in the OT, and the covenant of God with faithful Abraham is referred to in the NT as the ground of the hope of the Israel of God, both Jew and Gentile. "Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:22). Jesus said to the Jews, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (Jn. 8:56).

THE BIBLE AND OTHER RELIGIONS

One of the most prominent features of modern culture as applied to the Bible today is the emphasis placed on the study of comparative religions. This is strikingly illustrated by the fact that Eichrodt in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, makes this the starting point of his entire discussion. He tells us: "*No presentation of OT theology can properly be made without reference to its connections with the whole world of Near Eastern religion.* Indeed it is in its commanding such a wide panorama of the rich domain of man's religious activity that many will prefer to see the special significance of the faith of the OT" (italics are Eichrodt's).

Such a statement represents a viewpoint contrary to the spirit of the OT. While the OT frequently refers to the pagan cults, its consistent attitude toward them is one of rejection and abhorrence. Israel's "borrowings" from them are described in such terms as "went whoring" after other gods. Jeremiah has expressed the frequent turnings away of Israel to serve other gods, an attitude which he describes as unique among the nations, with the words: "Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain

of living waters, and hath hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (2:12f.).

This is the general attitude of the OT. What the student of comparative religions calls "borrowings," Moses and the prophets stigmatize as apostasy. In saying this we have reference to the *religion* of Israel. As a comment on Jeremiah's extremely apt and impressive figure, it may be pointed out that we do not know when or how the Israelites learned to line their cisterns with lime to make them watertight. They may have learned this from the Canaanites, as they may have acquired other arts and crafts from them. But the OT draws the line sharply against any borrowings in the sphere of religious faith and life. The same is true in NT times. The apostle Paul knew the pagan world of his day quite well. He gives a damning picture of it in the first chapter of Romans; and this makes doubly impressive the exhortation of the 12th chapter: "And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH A DIVINE INSTITUTION

In view of the importance now attached to comparative religion, the statement in the proposed Creed under the heading, "Revelation and Religion," is to be carefully studied. We read that "The church in its mission encounters the religions of men and in that encounter becomes conscious of its own human character as a religion." Were it not for the fact that we have just referred to the contemporary emphasis on comparative religion, we might think that here we are meeting a printer's error, that instead of "its own human character as a religion," we should read, "of its own *divine* character as a religion." For the mainspring of the missionary enterprise throughout the centuries has been the fact that the Christian religion is a divine revelation, a message which (as Paul declared so emphatically in the Galatian epistle) was not "after man," nor received "from man." He was not taught it "by man," but he received it "by revelation of Jesus Christ." Whatever good the Christian mis-

sionary may discover in pagan religions, he will always bear in mind the uniqueness of the gospel. He is the ambassador of One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me." This conviction has ever sent men and women to the ends of the earth, to proclaim the gospel of salvation to a world which is in darkness and the shadow of death.

Furthermore, it is not true that "The Christian religion, as distinct from God's revelation of himself, has been shaped throughout its history by the cultural forms of its environment." Undoubtedly the *Zeitgeist* of every age has left its mark on the life of the Church. Culture is a broad term which applies to much of human conduct. But the Christian is to be in the world, but not of it. For the fashion of this world passeth away, while the pattern which he is to follow is the same yesterday, today, and forever, which is Jesus Christ, his Lord.

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION ON THE SUFFICIENCY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

The emphasis placed by Eichrodt and others on comparative religion for the understanding and interpretation of the Bible stands in sharp contrast to the teachings of the Westminster Confession where we read:

> The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.

And again:

> The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, (which is not manifold, but one,) it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

This is the great doctrine of the sufficiency and per-

spicuity of Scripture; and it is particularly in need of emphasis today, when archaeology and comparative religion have acquired such importance in the eyes of many Bible students. Archaeology has thrown important light upon the history of Biblical times. But as Dr. Bright points out, it has not told us what the faith of Abraham was. The higher criticism of the Book of Genesis has not increased our knowledge in this regard, but has blurred and almost destroyed it, by telling us that we do not know what Abraham believed, because the Biblical tradition is late and undependable. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" was Isaiah's counsel to the men of his generation (8:20). Such advice is greatly needed today.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we turn to the New Testament we find a very different picture of Abraham from that given us by the modern O.T. critic. Abraham is one of the strongest links between the two Testaments. The name of Abraham appears 64 times in the N.T., more often even than that of David. Paul appeals to Genesis 15:6 to prove his great doctrine of justification by faith and points out that "they that be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham" (Gal. 3:6-11). Most significant is Jesus' use of the partriarchs to prove to the unbelieving Sadducees the resurrection from the dead (Mark 12:24ff.): "Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures neither the power of God?" He quotes to them the wonderful words spoken to Moses at the bush: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"; and he adds the obvious yet amazing inference: "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living," again rebuking them with the words, "Ye therefore do greatly err." Abraham had been dead nearly 2000 years. But he was living with the living God and would live forever. And Jesus gave his diciples the same assurance, when He said, "because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19).

Among all the mighty acts in the life of Jesus which are recorded in the New Testament, His resur-

rection from the dead is the most conspicuous. Paul tells us that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God, with power, according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). Elsewhere, he tells the Athenian philosophers of "Jesus, and the resurrection" (Acts 17), concluding with a reference to Christ's return to judge, "whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." It was the resurrection of the Lord on the third day which changed His disciples from a band of disillusioned, defeated mourners to a militant body of believers who went forth to win the world for their risen and glorified Lord.

EASTER AND THE FORM CRITICS

A form of the higher criticism of the Bible, more recent than that associated with the name of Wellhausen, is Form Criticism. According to it, back of the Biblical records, both New Testament and Old, are the oral traditions, which were gradually developed and shaped to meet the needs of the circles in which they originated. Consequently the great task of scholars who belong to this school has been to investigate these traditions as they appear in the Biblical record, and determine, if possible, the original form of the story. A leader in this new movement was Professor Martin Dibelius of Heidelberg University. In his book entitled *Jesus*, Chapter IX concludes with the crucifixion. It ends with this obituary for Jesus: "In utter humiliation and loneliness his life comes to an end." Does the next chapter give us a glorious account of the resurrection? It says:

> Here ends the life of Jesus, as far as it can be ascertained by historical science, i.e., that public activity which is the subject of this book. Faith, however, goes farther and relates: "They took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead. And during the course of many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:29-31). "Heaven must receive him until the time when all things must return to a fresh beginning" (Acts 3:21).

Dibelius here draws the line sharply between faith

and historical fact. He goes on to say "that the conviction that Jesus did not remain dead . . . is older than the Christian Easter stories." He claims that

> in the hour of crisis, the disciples held no such assurance. They fled (Mark 14:50), and gave up Jesus' cause for lost (Luke (24:19-21). Something must have happened in between, which in a short time not only produced a complete reversal of their attitude but also enabled them to engage in renewed activity and to found the primitive Christian community. This "something" is the historical kernel of the Easter faith. How it evolved is nowhere described. Only a few hints and echoes enable us to say anything at all about it.

What was this *something* which had such wonderful consequences? He answers:

> It is clear that Peter, first of all, then the other disciples of Jesus, and then still other followers, including even his hitherto unbelieving brother James, had visions in which they saw their departed Master alive and exalted to heavenly glory.

What does this mean? Simply this, that instead of the Easter stories related in the Gospels—of the empty tomb, and the appearance of angels to the women, and the other appearances, which constitute the "many infallible proofs" to which Luke refers—the Christian doctrine of the resurrection rests on a series of visions. Yet, according to Luke, when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room, he showed them His hands and said to them: "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have." It might seem that this incident is recorded for the express purpose of disproving the vision theory, at the very beginning of the history of the Church. Yet here we have it proposed many centuries later by a professor of New Testament in a German University. And this is the teaching which is now widely proclaimed by Bultmann, who tells us that the Bible must be "demythologized" in order to make it acceptable to the modern mind. To Bultmann, Tillich, and many others the supernaturalism of the Bible is an offense which must

be done away with. This must be so, because we live in a closed universe, which is governed by natural law, into which God's entrance as a responsible agent and actor would be an unwelcome and unwarranted intrusion. Yet it is the fact that the Bible is the record of the saving acts of the living Creator-God, who made man in his image and redeems him by his grace, which has made it during uncounted centuries God's message of salvation to a lost world. What has become of Paul's triumphant words: "But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept"?

In recent months many Christians have been shocked by the emergence of a "God-is-dead" cult. They really should not be. For many years the aim of many scholars has been to secularize Bible history, to minimize the supernatural and bring it into accord with "scientific" thinking. The measure of their success is seen in the fact that an effort is now being made to justify the introduction of courses on Bible history into public schools and state universities on the ground that such Bible teaching does not involve the teaching of religion and therefore does not infringe upon constitutional requirements as to the separation between church and state. If the Bible can be so taught, it will be because it has ceased to be the Bible! For the Bible from beginning to end is a religious book.

The above quotations are all taken from books published by the Westminster Press under the authority of the Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian, now United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. They have been cited for the purpose of illustrating the meaning and implications of the words of the proposed Confession of 1967: "The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding," which means, according to Dr. Dowey, to restate and interpret it in terms of evolution, of higher criticism, and of development in theology. Such teachings as these are in conflict with the Scriptures and with the doctrinal standards of our Church. It is the manifest purpose of the proposed Confession so to change our standards that such radical teachings will no longer be in conflict but

in harmony with the Standards of the Church and be authorized and approved by them. In this way the forces which make for change, radical change in the doctrinal position of the Church will be greatly strengthened and the authority and trustworthiness of the Scriptures, on which our present Confession is wholly based, be correspondingly weakened and undermined. Do we wish our faith to rest on the changing opinions of men or on the unchanging and infallible Word of the living God? That is the issue which the Confession of 1967 sets before the Presbyterians of today.

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